

3. THE CRYSTAL PALACE



The Crystal Palace was an epitome (if such an epithet can be applied to anything so colossal) of the most excellent and execrable features of the Victorian age. It was also the last, and first, landmark of London which travellers to the Continent saw on their journeys out and home.

For us it was an especial sign, since our family lived close to it for two generations. Even my Father, who came there as a boy could not remember its pristine splendour when, with clean glass flashing diamond-wise under sunlight, it was planted upon the Sydenham hill-top after it had served its purpose in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851. People described it then as a "fairy palace" for light and brilliance. By the time I came on the scenes the fairy brightness had been veiled beneath years of London dust, and though industriously cleaned and painted by men who worked interminably like flies upon its vast surfaces, it was never quite clean all over at the same time. Still, it gave out great sparkles and looked lordly at times of the Triennial Handel Festivals when the pale gray-blue-mauveish colouring with which the iron work was painted harmonized both with the sheen of glass and the hot, hazy skies of June. I was also too late in time to have known it in its architectural symmetry. The North end had been burnt down one Sunday afternoon with a sad destruction of live cockatoos and stone imitations of Assyrian bulls, before I was born, and the tale of the burning was one of the terrifying

tales of the neighbourhood. Another was of the day when the great water tank burst and a torrent, fierce and powerful, raged down West Hill and Fountain Road, nearly drowning the Indian who guarded the turnstile entrance to the North Tower Garden. Happily he survived and I can remember his dark face and stately presence surmounted by a big turban, as he looked at my ticket, or took our money, before pressing the apparatus which allowed us to push through what was a veritable revolving monkey-puzzle tree of iron into the Garden precincts. Today, by a strange freak of fate, nothing remains of the Palace except that water tank. Where of old one saw on the sky-line the huge Centre Transept with its long wings far-stretching to north and south, and beyond them again the strange, slender towers with their bulging tops, and the Water Tank as an appanage dwarfed by their presence, now one sees nothing save that old Water Tank, perching on its spindly legs, an unnaturally obtrusive object in the landscape. All the rest has gone. Most of it vanished on that December night in 1936 when the Crystal Palace was destroyed by a fire so swift in onset that people playing Badminton in one of the Courts and an orchestra practising in the concert room barely had time to flee before the place became a furnace pouring cliffs of flame into the darkness. Everything the Palace was and had been went then save the Towers (and of course the Water Tank!) They poked up with a meaningless air from the scene of their former importance. They were not meaningless, however, to hostile aircraft - they were but too useful guides. Everyone who knew the neighbourhood

must have drawn a breath of relief when, during the War, the South Tower was taken down, and the North Tower successfully felled by dynamite. It went to its end with a decorum worthy of an aristocrat going to the guillotine. An eye-witness told me that as the dynamite exploded the tower lifted gently in the air, appeared to curtsy and then fell so quietly and harmlessly that hardly anyone could realize the execution was over.

To have the Crystal Palace clean gone is better than to see ⁱⁿ it/decay. The derelict of recent years, derided by moderns, for its Victorianism, need now never be recalled. Instead, the Crystal Palace in its prime is an abiding possession. In memory I can re-enter it, can roam at will among its courts and gardens, can hear once more its unique concerts, can see again its beauties and freaks, can feel its stout planks under my feet, can sniff its eclectic odours, from the perfume of the rose-shows, rich and magical, to the peculiarly unpleasant smell of Fenton's ivory work in the half basement. No one can remove that Palace now; no one can say me nay when I wish to enter it. Memory is my season ticket. Other people, with similar season tickets, will perhaps recognize the places I visit.

Had the men who controlled the Palace at the end of the 19th century been endowed with vision and had our then Governments had foresight, the Palace might have become, with ever-increasing resources, a superb centre for education of a sort such as no University or School today quite supplies.

A good deal of my earliest education occurred in the Palace. Like the ancient Greeks my parents decided I should learn dancing and music ahead of other subjects. I was accordingly entered as an infant pupil in the Dancing Class held weekly by a Miss Louisa Pears at the Crystal Palace School of Art. This meant that each Tuesday morning my Mother and I would leave home about ten-thirty walk up the Avenue and Farquhar Road to the little side entrance to the High Level Station, thence across the Station, under the heavy arches of the subway and up into the Palace itself. This station (which my sister Freda, who lisped as a small child called 'the High Devil' greatly to my Grandfather's delight) was pretty quiet in the mornings, the rush of City men going to their offices being over. When we entered the Palace it too was quiet and still undergoing its daily cleaning. The board flooring would be damp from the sawdust or bran, sprinkled with water with which it was being brushed, and the innumerable plants, from pot flowers, aspidistras and palms in the Centre Transept to great tree ferns at the so-called tropical end, would all be breathing out moist scent into the warm air after being watered. We would walk across the Transept, passing the great Handel Festival Orchestra with its tier upon tier of seats, the organ at the summit, and, beyond that again, the names of Handel's works frescoed in enormous letters round the top of the orchestra. I used to spell them out to myself - Esther, Israel in Egypt , Acis and Galatea, Dettingen Te Deum, and the rest - and then we would go straight on down the North Nave with its statues and plants on either ~~side~~ ^{hand}

dividing it from the courts on either side, until we came to the fountain at the end, with its large basin like a shallow pond, its tall tree ferns, and the parrots and cockatoos chained to their perches like uneasy genii. They were reputed to be very fierce, and I cannot wonder if they were. Their lives must have been miserable. Flapping and screeching, they struggled at the ends of their chains, teased by passers by, and tormented by captivity. Why were Victorians so stupidly cruel to birds? Once safely past the cockatoos my spirits would revive and my Mother and I, turning to the right, would enter the range of rooms forming the School of Art. The Dancing Class took place in what was perhaps the pleasantest of them all - a long wide room, one side of which consisted wholly of windows, being indeed a section high up, of the glass face of the Palace itself. The view was not however that over London, but gave upon the other frontage overlooking the grounds which fell away in great terraces and fountains, to where beyond, mile after mile, stretched the Kentish country until in the blue distance it reached the sky line of the North Downs crowned with the little clump of Knockholt Beeches as a kind of Beacon. For years those distant Downs fascinated one like a magical land into which one never found the entrance, a dream country, a St. Brendan's isle.....

The sole ornament of the room was a very large, good copy of one of Murillo's most famous pictures. Thus the Virgin Mary apparently presided over the dancing ! We were strictly taught. Our instructress used all the old French terms, and even taught us

the Gavotte and Menuet along with such Victorian favourites as the Lancers, Quadrille, Valse, Polka and Gallop. She was rather like a French Marquise of the ancien régime herself with grey hair, and delicately thin waist, but her supple little feet were shod in elastic sided prunella boots ! ultra Victorian.

The class over, I would beg my Mother to take me back through some of the courts. In a moment we could plunge into Italy of the Renaissance, and find ourselves face to face with the sculptured masterpieces - in life size and first rate replica - of the works of Michael Angelo, Torrigianl, Donatello and the rest. They made a powerful impression on me; though too small to understand them I obtained a photographic appreciation of their beauty. Or we could cross the North Aisle and enter the court which reproduced a room in the Alhambra - the splendours of colour and pattern - covering the walls glowing in a perpetual mystery of the dim light, which filtered down ~~from~~ four windows set high and small. To this day the mere name Alhambra exercises on me an enchantment akin to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". From these Moorish glories we could pace easily on through courts devoted to the famous statues and busts of ancient Greece and Rome. The faces of Augustus, Antinous and the Dying Gladiator became more familiar to me than our ~~own~~ local postman. Beyond these again we could go to Egypt, gaze half-mesmerized at the statue of the great Rameses, and study those frescoes in which Osiris, Isis, Horus, Thoth, Pharoahs, Priests, Cats, Slaves, and offerings figured in endless intricacy.

History lived for my sisters and me as something encountered, not as something learnt, though we afterwards begged to be instructed in the ancient world to explain what we could not fathom from frescoes and busts. (A little history of Greece in French was an early bribe for me towards Languages). The mythological statues particularly exercised our curiosity. The Venus of Milo, the Apollo Belvedere, the Perseus by Benvenuto Cellini, and all the rest..... When at the age of ten I went to stay with an Aunt and found Smith's Classical Dictionary in her bookcase I had a beatific time browsing over it, till my occupation was discovered, and the book confiscated as totally unsuitable for a little girl. In point of fact I was too young to be depraved by it ! The immoral doings of pagan deities slid by me more meaninglessly than the proverbial water off a duck's back.

The Assyrian courts at the Palace I never saw; they had been destroyed by that Sunday fire before my time. The Pompeian House however survived and was a favourite place of pilgrimage. With its central fountain sunk in the tessellated pavement and the square of rooms built round it, the open water and the shaded rooms suggested southern sunlight in an extraordinary way. When we emerged from the Pompeian House it was to find ourselves near the big fountain in the South Transept and that in turn was near the groups of African native tribes. These quaint figures were life-size, men, women and children,

very brown and black, clad mostly in beads, standing about on what was supposed to resemble their native earth, each group railed off and neatly labelled. Presiding above all, and peering down the whole length of the Palace, hung the giant clock on the south wall - an immense disc round which the hands moved ^{with} by visible jerks ~~and~~ audible clicks.

From this south end of the Palace the covered way descended by interminable dreary corridors and flights of stairs, to the Low Level Station. The corresponding range of buildings at the North End had, I suppose, originally joined the North Transept but that I do not know. What I can recall is the strange succession of sights through which one passed on going down it. There was the Orangery, with its exotic and fragrant orange trees, and the camellias, scentless but exquisite in their glossy, fine-curved green leaves and unruffled flowers of rosetted crimson and white. There was the Monkey House, smelling frightfully and filled with intensely active little beasts leaping about their cages. My Mother never liked to linger here. There was the Parrot House, which I hated. There was the long dark Aquarium, dank of air, where fish of many kinds swam in their melancholy tanks and the skates in particular glided up and down the glass front, making hideous faces at the passers-by. There were the low, heavily barred pools where in warm water, the crocodiles and alligator lay blinking their weary but unchangeably wicked eyes at the entire human race.

When one emerged into the open air one might turn left to visit the Maze (which I hardly ever entered), the Archery Ground and the open grassy space where on Bank Holidays a balloon would be slowly inflated before the gaze of hundreds of spectators, finally to wobble off into the sky towards five o'clock like a gigantic Cinderella's pumpkin. Here also was the greensward on which, as the advertisements put it, there was on Bank Holidays dancing all day long on the lawns, while various side-shows, such as Aunt Sally enlivened the borders.

If, however, one turned right on leaving the alligator, one might seek the Bear Pit which lurked in an angle below one of the Grand Terraces and - to be frank - was very much like most other bear pits before Mappin Terraces were invented.

Walking in the grounds was one of the most tiring efforts of our young lives. The paths were covered with deep layers of little stones and grit that slid and crunched and threw up dust with every step. The hill descended fairly steeply and immense flights of steps, made of the hardest granite I ever met, conducted one downward to the different Terraces, the fountains, and finally the more open hill-foot, where was to be found the round brick building of the Panorama, entitled "The Siege of Paris". This we used to study from time to time in a detached way, no more sorry for Paris than we should have been for Timbuctoo.

The lower stretch of the Grounds was pretty and sylvan, until a Switchback Railway was erected. Even then the Grounds were so

big as to reduce the Switchback to a mere incident and to accommodate a Cycle Track and a Football Ground. In rather later years my sisters, a friend and I developed a great enthusiasm for watching Cycle Races and would stand for hours while professional riders tore round paced by teams of "quads" or "quints" (not Dionne's but Dunlop) fed from time to time by eagerly pedalling attendants. We usually took with us a special umbrella on these occasions. It went by the name of 'Stump-Eye' because the ferrule had been worn to nothing by our friend's vigorous applause, and no race was complete somehow, unless we had jolly little Stump-Eye along with us. It all sounds very odd and silly now, when Motor Racing has put the pace up into figures then undreamt of, but it was exciting to us and a very good way of spending an afternoon in the open air. The whole neighbourhood was thrilled, I remember, when Cordang, a Dutchman, made a World twenty-four hour record at the Crystal Palace.

Beyond the Cycle Track lay the Cricket Ground screened by trees and great shrubs, as pretty and green a place as heart would wish. Here, on Saturday afternoons in summer, my Father liked to watch the play, having been a keen cricketer, and he would take us with him, and presently give us teas which included the famous Crystal Palace Cake and buns. The latter were an apotheosis of their kind - round, glistening, glossy, brown-topped, curranted. The cake was unlike anything I have met since, very rich in its melting yellow substance, set through and through with currants and fruit, and cut in neat thickish square blocks, piled one upon another.

Still further, beyond the leisured Cricket Ground, was the Great Lake. Here boats could be hired, which is what might be expected. What was unexpected were the huge stone models of pre-historic monsters, which rose or crawled along the shores of the Lake, quite as large as life, if hardly as natural. The Megatherium standing on his hind legs to nibble the top of a large tree was perhaps my favourite. An engaging beast!

They were so typically Victorian in their size and instructiveness that - forgoing an orderly progress back into the Palace up the innumerable staircases without and within - I must whisk straight back into a lonely gallery which ran somewhere high along the front face of the Northern arm of the Crystal Palace there to see the equally Victorian collection of tiny animals. Originally these had been stuffed, dressed, and set in a series of little tableaux in glass cases to depict the story of Reynard the Fox. By now they were very dusty, not to say moth-eaten, and were about as accurate as any stuffed animals can be. The Fox, propped up in bed with his sharp snout showing under his frilled human night-cap was unforgettable. I think the whole show was more fascinatingly frightening than the Antidiluvian monsters. They were German, probably a relic of the Great Exhibition of 1851. They were called 'The Wurtemberg Collection of Stuffed Animals'.

Having got into the swing of animal stories I think I must go on with them till I have 'covered' (to use the journalistic phrase) those animals which were not part of the establishment at

the Palace but which came as visitors. The least agreeable of these were the exhibits at the poultry shows, days when the noise approximated to dementia and the percentage of floor in the Crystal Palace (may the Victorians forgive the indelicacy!) went up steeply. More pleasant were the pigeons, while the Dog Shows though a pandemonium of barking, were well worth attending. The Cat Shows were nicest of all. Rows upon rows of silken-haired cats, white, black, grey, tortoiseshell, tabby, sitting upon gaily coloured silken cushions, while fascinating kittens played as happily as if in their own homes.

But the animals that came at Christmas were the most exciting members of travelling Circuses and Menageries. They brought an element of fantasy into the neighbourhood, as I shall relate in another chapter, and even some danger. I recall an evening when a Chamber Concert was in progress in the Music Court and the lions and tigers in the menagerie across the South Wave began to ask for their supper. Loud and louder rose the roaring. We, sitting demurely at the Concert, found ourselves toying with the speculation "Had the lions escaped? If so, what, or who, would they eat?".....To this day the Bach Concerto in D minor for two violins (which was the work under performance) calls up a vision of two violinists on the platform, pale of face, glancing nervously over their shoulders, but sticking gamely to their job, their heavenly strains in the Adagio, mingling with the most hellish growls of demons. Musicians are not often called on to

confront wild beasts, but at the Palace they were. They came through the Ordeal wall. They even played one Homerie exploit to the honour of their profession. This occurred on a winter day when a Circus was performing in the Centre Transept. The Crystal Palace Military Band was in attendance to provide music. One of the turns included a performing bear. Suddenly the animal broke out of control, made for a man, got him down and began savagely mauling him. Quick as thought, the Bandmaster, Herbert Colfroy, picked up one of the heavy iron music desks, rushed at the bear, beat it over the head with the bar, forced it to leave the man, and kept it at bay until help arrived.

This Military Band was one of the regular amenities of the Crystal Palace. Winter and summer it played cheerfully in, or out of doors, and generally made itself useful. During the summer I rather think the afternoon and evening sessions in the North Tower Garden were shared by guest bands, but of this I am not so sure as of the foolishness displayed for such tunes as "A Life on the Ocean Wave", or "The man that broke the bank at Monte Carlo". The evening session always ended loyally with "God save the Queen". As these North Tower Garden performances were audible for half a mile or more around, we heard a good deal of them in our home in the Avenue. This sometimes posed me with a pretty problem. From very tender years I had been taught to kneel to say my prayers; also I had been taught to stand for the National Anthem. When my bedtime advanced to an hour that synchronized with the close of the Band Concert, I found myself in a

dilemma. Should a praying child spring from its knees and stand to attention till its Sovereign had been saved, or should it address itself unmoved to Heaven ?

The Centre Transept was of all parts more characteristic of the compound nature of the Crystal Palace. In it, or closely adjacent, were the most excellent and elegant activities, and also the most popular, such as the circuses, the pantomimes in the huge theatre facing the Handel Festival Orchestra, and the hair-raising achievements of acrobats and tight-rope walkers. We learnt to view quite calmly the promenades undertaken by ladies or gentlemen in skin tights across the rope or slack-wire slung far up in the heights of the Centre Transept. Here also, on the floor of the Transept, the American Bicycle Polo Team caused a furore during my student years, and the matchless Paul Cinquevalli used to perform his juggling tricks. What an artist he was ! the Paderewski of his profession. Few men in this world can ever have had such control of themselves and their materials. To see him juggle simultaneously a piece of paper, a billiard ball and a cannon ball, or to see him balance and raise a billiard ball on a billiard cue were experiences supreme of their kind. His skill was unsurpassable. Indeed I rate him as one of the greatest and most modest artists I ever saw in any field whatsoever.

The big theatre, as I have said, was used for Pantomimes, but there was another theatre, still of good size, situated not far from the Transept, which served for plays, operas, and variety shows. It was there I saw my first opera, the music of which

nored me, but from which I retained a vivid memory of one person named the tenor. Years after, when I saw him as Loge in the first English "Ring" at Covent Garden under Richter, I understood why! He was that rare combination of a singer, a musician, and a forceful actor in one.

Somewhere near the theatre lay the Club, where the retired military and naval officers and other professional men, who mostly made up the membership, foregathered for the tranquillity and talk Victorian men-folk liked when the female sex were excluded. Whether it really was so tranquil I do not know, but I should think sounds from the Centre Transept frequently invaded it. For instance there were the daily organ recitals, when first Alfred Eyre and later Walter Wedgecock used to play solos into the great void. So far as I can recall no one stayed to ~~listen~~ listen; the organ pealed out over the people as they walked along intent upon their own business. But the programmes were often good, and always melodious. As a child I was enchanted if I could hear "O for the wings, for the wings of a dove" floating above me.

Then there were the times when sporadic Festivals or contests took place in the Handel Festival Orchestra and countless school children lifted light voices in song, or equally countless brass bandsmen blew the roof off (metaphorically) with their mighty masses of sound. If one could bear it, it was majestic.

All these things however were extraneous to the two great musical institutions of the Crystal Palace - the Handel Festivals and the Saturday Concerts, conducted by August Manns. These latter took place in the Concert Room, reserved entirely for serious music, and were absolutely unique. They demand a chapter to themselves. For years they were the weekly delight of my Father and Mother. For myself no words can express what I owe to them nor how intensely I lived in the music I heard performed at them. Even the chapter I am going to devote to them will be insufficient for what I feel. But before it I must record the Handel Festivals which came round triennially and the single Oratorio performances on Festival scale which took their place in the intermediate years.

These were impressive in their own way, and I recall one outstanding experience - Santley's singing as "Elijah". Even in the bewildering vastness of the Centre Transept, where human beings dwindled to mere pawns, Santley's interpretation of the fiery prophet dominated everyone and everything.

Next to Handel Mendelssohn's music did best when performed on this vast scale, but only in Handel's choruses was the overwhelming concourse of voices genuinely majestic. Well might Beethoven say of Handel "He is the master of us all". A good Handel Festival was an event not to be missed, even if one disliked - and rightly disliked - this exploitation of the colossal.

For months beforehand choirs all over the Kingdom would be learning the appointed works. In June would come a day, the Grand Rehearsal, when special trains would pour in to High Level, Low Level and Gipsy Hill Stations, and from them would stream hundreds of singers armed with their scores or instrumentalists clutching their instruments, all converging upon the Centre Transept. The public was allowed to attend this rehearsal. Then would come the three days of the Festival itself, generally allotted to "Messiah", "Israel in Egypt" or "Judas Maccabeus" and "Selection Day". The weather was often hot; and the heat under the glass roof of the Palace may be imagined. Even though a big awning was slung over the auditorium and every window was open, the St. John's Ambulance men and nurses had plenty of cases to look after, when they would extract fainting forms with the minimum of fuss from the orchestra or audience. Many of the latter had arrived by train, though others would prance up grandly in carriage and pair to the Centre Transept Door, having driven all the way from London. It was a brilliant gathering, sometimes headed by Royalty, and everyone wore their summer best. I can still see in memory the yellowish wood and cane chairs on which they sat, and the coca fibre matting on the aisles along which they walked after having come through the mauve-gray wooden barriers that cut off the Transept from the rest of the Palace.....just as I can see the sea of faces rising opposite us on the orchestra, and August Manns, like a miniature of himself at that distance, on his conductor's podium (to use the American term) with its brass

rails and old-fashioned backless seat of red velvet edged with heavy woollen fringe.

My Father could recall Festivals when Sims Reeves had sung. He always said that for beauty of voice and style no other tenor he ever heard in his whole life could approach Reeves - and my Father was no mean judge. I, alas, never heard that great singer. By my time Albani, Edward Lloyd and Santley were the principal stars. But how good to be able to recall such a voice and cantilena as Lloyd's ! a perfect voice for oratorio in its purity and poise. It was in the Choruses, however, that the real strength of the Festival resided. To hear the "Hailstone Chorus" for the first time under such conditions was terrific. As to the great chain of choruses in "Messiah" I think I first became acquainted with them by the Hallelujahs, the Amens, that used to spread out over the neighbourhood from the open casements of the Palace, and which I heard from our garden at home. Presently came a year when I heard the whole at the Festival itself, and began that love for "Messiah" which in later years, when I have been in grief, has taken me for comfort past the house in Brook Street where Handel in 1741, lonely and in trouble, shut himself up to compose, and "did think he saw the Heavens opened" in the Hallelujah Chorus.

So great was the effect of this music on me that it influenced one of the most vivid dreams I ever had. I dreamt one night I was walking along that wide road, the Crystal Palace Parade, which ran the whole length of the Palace frontage, On

the other the wide view out over several miles to London and the Hampstead heights. But nothing looked normal. Instead, though the objects in the landscape were visible, there was a strange lightlessness, and the sky was dark, as when the sun is eclipsed. I could not indeed see any sun, though a copper-red, burnt-out moon was guttering low down in the sky. The road was empty; nothing moved; an ominous hush lay over everything. I became aware that this was the end of the world. I stood awestruck, utterly solitary. Then suddenly, though I still saw no one, I heard coming not only from the Palace but from all the sky and earth in sudden radiance a grand, a stupendous music, sung as if by every voice in the world. And what they sang was that mighty passage in the Hallelujah Chorus, having the words "The Kingdoms of this world are become the Kingdoms of our Lord".

How dreams can rebuke the daylight happenings of today!

Revelation
XI. 15